# From C[illegible]rves



**THE FUTURE IS OURS, COMRADE.** Conversations with the Russians. By Joseph Novak. 286 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. $3.95.

By RICHARD C. HOTTELET

YOU taste the title's full flavor only gradually as you meet the Comrades to whom it applies. Confidence and pride are in it, as you might expect, but as various Russians spell out the lives they lead and the thoughts they think in the present, the image of their future (and possibly ours) takes form as a drab, dank nightmare.

This book is no potboiler for the Soviet-gooseflesh trade or for those seeking the key to coexistence. It is an interesting personal document, grimly fascinating and important not so much for the author's conclusions as for the testimony which permits the reader to draw his own. In a book like this, which is one man's report of conversations and situations in several years in the Soviet Union, everything depends on the reporter's credentials. Joseph Novak is a pseudonym. The author is extremely careful about concealing his own identity and that of his sources. Of himself he lets it be known only that he is a young man from one of the European satellite countries, a minor bureaucrat with a scientific background, fluent Russian and influential contacts in the Soviet hierarchy. He is certainly a serious person, and there is nothing to suggest that he has not honestly recorded and summarized the remarkable material on everyday life and opinion in the U. S. S. R. which he could gather from the inside.

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Stalin's secret-police empire no longer dominates the Soviet picture—with its slave labor system and the primitive brutality of its purge machinery. Khrushchev and his colleagues are men of the twentieth century, temperamentally incapable of carrying on with the purely Stalinist method, even if they were physically able to do so. They know that people who are not paralyzed with terror are more productive and give Soviet strategy a much broader operating base.

It would be leaping to a very wrong conclusion to assume that in turning from medieval to enlightened despotism the regime has relaxed its hold on its subjects. As Novak points out, the circumstances of life, the pattern of bureaucratic control and the unchanged demand for conformity in thought and action impose obedience. The individual is overwhelmed by his problems and his surroundings. One who might rise above both also knows that the instruments of compulsion are still highly efficient.

The state never leaves a man alone. The individual and the family are submerged in the collective. The chronic housing shortage, which keeps people living in each other's pockets, makes it impossible for the little man to conceal any deviation from the accepted norm. The supervision and rating of his every act, the circulation of reports on his character and social attitudes among his house committee, factory, union, school, army, party and other agencies with which he has dealt, determine his life and his future as directly as if he were kept in a cage. Marriage, divorce, promotion, well-being are all affected by entries in his dossier.

As one learns to obey traffic rules in a busy city and cross streets all day long without a nervous breakdown, the Soviet citizen instinctively knows how to stay away from danger. When a factory worker senses that he is in disfavor and that he may be transferred to a job in Siberia, he may volunteer for a binge of "socialist competition," working like a dog even at the risk of his health to get back on the credit side of the ledger. Workers, says the author, "undertake an effort too big for their strength in the hope that this will permit them to get rid of the sense of guilt and sin which is always and everywhere with them. Even the medieval Orthodox Church didn't go so far in creating this guilt complex in the faithful."

There would be no guilt if there were no punishment; and it would take a Charlie Chaplin to portray the hapless soul who accidently flushed his party card and other papers down a toilet in a Moscow hotel frequented by foreigners. The police professed not to believe that he had not given them to a spy. He was sentenced to four years in a labor camp, which bad health will turn into a sentence of death.

The record is all-important. A tragic-comic chapter on an army regiment, which tried to hide shortcomings that had been arranged by counter-intelligence, stands out as an exercise in malevolent bureaucracy. Officials who conceal errors lest they suffer by association are soundly chastised. Small wonder that the careerist's chief rule of self-preservation is to be the first to expose any infraction. Another, be it in the shop, the university or as a tourist abroad, is to accept the official line of each day as the ultimate truth.

Vivid variations on the theme of conditioned behavior make this book impressive despite its limited scope. But the author gives the broad conclusion of a veteran diplomat. Speaking of "the present Kremlin group," he says, "They spy upon one another and inform. They watch each other's every move. You might call them the victims of the system of power they have built. * * * A victorious war with the forces of imperialism would open for them, as men, not only new possibilities of power, but their insecurity would diminish. * * * That's probably why the pro-war and aggressive policy of Comrade Mao Tse-tung and his Chinese group has so many adherents in Khrushchev's circles, including Khrushchev himself."

Other reporters have found the Soviet scene less grim. But most of them have not had the opportunity Jos[illegible]had to look closely the seamy side of

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**Remarks:**

The author's name is a pseudo. He is really the man for whom he want that residence visa privaleg bill passed. It's evident even from this review that the author would be less than persona grata at home if his true identity leaked out.

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